



EXECUTIVE COMPUTING

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'WordPerfect' may be best for word processing

When evaluating word processing programs, it's easy to get bogged down in detailed feature-by-feature comparisons. Instead, I'd like to skip right to the top and mention the two word processing programs most often recommended by experienced users and computer dealers: *WordPerfect* by SSI Software (available at local computer dealers, \$495 for the IBM PC) and *Microsoft Word* from Microsoft (also available locally, \$520 including mouse attachment for the IBM PC).

Here are some reasons for looking at these two first:

✓ **Safety in numbers.** More than anything else, a word processing program needs to be reliable and functionally complete. It needs to contain a zillion features, many of which you don't even know you'll need at the time of evaluation. It is comforting to know that your program successfully passed the test with tens of thousands of other business users.

✓ **Savings in time and energy.** Many word processing programs have hidden problems, which may take time and energy to unravel. For example, the slick new *WordStar 2000* (not to be confused with standard WordStar) operates so slowly that it will strain your patience. In short, it saves effort to focus on the widely recommended programs.

✓ **Difficult choice.** Finally, as you'll see when you look at the features of WordPerfect and Microsoft Word, these two alone will provide you with a difficult choice. Each uses a very different approach that will please some and annoy others. The most dramatic difference is that Microsoft Word uses a "mouse and menu" system to move the cursor and give commands, while WordPerfect relies on the function keys (a set of 10 keys on the left side of the IBM PC keyboard). Each approach has inherent efficiencies and drawbacks.

Dealers Like WordPerfect

In the course of selling a variety of word processing programs, many astute computer dealers and consultants discovered something early on that aided them immensely: Different word processing programs had different strengths and weaknesses that made them suitable for one job or another. But WordPerfect seemed to fit the bill no matter what the need.

In other words, the dealers could not go wrong recommending WordPerfect. Almost always, the result was a happy customer. The program was fast, could handle complex tasks such as mail-merges, and came with "printer drivers" for almost any printer imaginable.

Before long, word got around to the point that many dealers routinely sold the program with all new computers. Some even went so far as to package it with the hardware.

Then, about a year ago, two things happened that increased its popularity even more: A new version was released with new features and a superb manual; and it was given a very high rating by a key computer trade magazine.

Is it really that good?

But is it really that good? To find out, I obtained a copy and used it for several months to prepare this column and the newsletter of the Association of Computer Users. I tested virtually all its features, including mail-merge and spell-checking, and used it to drive a variety of printers — dot matrix, daisy wheel, even the Hewlett-Packard LaserJet. Here are the results:

- ✓ I concur that WordPerfect is exceptionally reliable and versatile. It is easy to see why dealers like it, because it has virtually every feature you might need.

- ✓ On the negative side, with versatility comes complexity. It is not as easy to learn and use as most less capable programs. WordPerfect requires several days of use before proficiency is obtained — compared with several hours for simpler programs.

- ✓ The manual and tutorial sections are excellent, making it possible for most new users to learn the program with minimum assistance. No one in your office, regardless of his or her level of experience with computers, should have trouble learning the basic, everyday features of WordPerfect. At the same time, all the more advanced features are available in case you need them.

- ✓ If you want your text to be right justified, the program can't show you on the screen what the right margins will look like. You have to wait until the document is printed to see the hard copy. This bothers people who use the right justification option frequently.

- ✓ The spell-checking feature, while acceptable, left a lot to be desired compared to other programs on the market. In particular, it had difficulty suggesting the correct spelling of words when the first few letters were not correct, which happens frequently. This naturally bothers poor spellers more than good spellers.

Despite the drawbacks, I found the WordPerfect program very acceptable for general office needs. How does it compare with the features and ease-of-use of Microsoft Word? I'll review Microsoft Word and compare the two programs in next week's column.

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